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AUTHOR Flowers, R. Barri
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ABSTRACT

Current statistics on arrests, convictions, and prison inmates and recent studies on violence by women indicate that the number of women who commit violent crimes is rising. Violent crimes include murder, rape, terrorism, gang participation, domestic violence, and prostitution. The first section, "Women Who Kill," discusses women who murder their partners in response to physical abuse. In "The Female Rapist," women are shown to be the aggressors in sexual assaults. Another violent crime, rarely associated with women, is terrorism. Recent studies show that female terrorists are displaying extreme viciousness and cruelty. As women struggle to meet their economic needs, their participation in gang activities that include muggings and thefts has increased. The physical abuse of children and partners by women appears to have surpassed the incidence of domestic violence by men. Violence that stems from prostitution involves the prostitutes' need to support their chemical dependency. Studies reveal that the increase in violence is not restricted to adult women, and the number of female juvenile offenders is also increasing. Four reasons are cited to explain violent women: (1) premenstrual syndrome; (2) the women's liberation movement; (3) economic pressures; and (4) substance abuse. Six suggestions are included for curbing violent behavior. (DJC)

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BY

R. BARRI FLOWERS

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# VIOLENT WOMEN: ARE THEY CATCHING UP TO VIOLENT MEN OR HAVE THEY SURPASSED THEM?

R. Barri Flowers

CHARLENE, TWENTY-SEVEN, PLEADED guilty to two counts of second-degree murder in the deaths of two Nevada teenagers. The plea bargain was in exchange for testifying against her husband in a series of gruesome murders covering three western states. Referred to by the Deputy Public Defender at her husband's trial as a "confessed murderess" who "lies and escapes the death penalty," Charlene is now serving her fixed sentence of 16 years, 8 months in Nevada.

Dawn, twenty-six, is serving a 20 year-to-life term in New York's state prison for women after being convicted of murder and attempted robbery. In recounting the motivation for the crime in which she also had a male accomplice, Dawn, a mother, admits: "It was greed, something different to do -- different from getting up in the morning, going to work, running to the babysitter."

Are these cases of violent women isolated incidences or are they a clear indication that women are becoming more destructive and callous in their behavior? In her widely read book, Sisters in Crime, that came out in the mid-seventies, Freda Adler, Ph.D., a Rutgers University criminal justice professor, contends that, "Women are committing more aggressive crimes, more violent crimes, and that trend is expected to continue."

Rita Simon, author of Women and Crime, concurs. "As women's opportunities to commit crimes increase, so will their deviant

behavior and the types of crimes they commit will much more closely resemble those committed by men."

Men have traditionally been thought to be responsible for the vast majority of violent crime in our society. Has this perception changed any? Not according to the statistics. Official data shows that the ratio of males-to-females arrested for violent crimes is nine-to-one. However, between 1977 and 1986, female arrests for violent crimes rose 38 percent compared to 24 percent for men. The number of females arrested for aggravated assault during this period jumped nearly 50 percent compared to a 43 percent climb for male arrestees. These figures would seem to indicate that the gap is narrowing between men and women violent offenders.

Further evidence that women may be becoming more violent can be seen in their swelling numbers in U.S. prisons. Since 1981, the adult female inmate population has grown at a considerably faster rate than male prisoners. While much evidence suggests this to be the result of longer sentences for women for traditional offenses such as larceny and drug use, there is reason (such as the arrest data noted) to believe that an increasing number of women are being incarcerated for violent and aggressive crimes. Indeed, there is ample indication that not only are many women every bit as violent as their male counterparts, but in some instances, they may have outdistanced them.

Let us take a closer look at the violence perpetrated by women, much of which rarely shows up in black and white in the

statistics.

WOMEN WHO KILL

Although the phenomenon of women killers is rare, relatively speaking, they do exist. In 1986, 1,890 women were arrested for murder. A recent study found that contrary to popular misconceptions that these women are either of the "arsenic and old lace" type -- the stealthy, deceptive grandmother -- or the types such as Charlene and Dawn -- who murder under the guidance of a man -- women who kill are no more emotional or less predictable than men who kill.

The study did find that homicidal women are commonly characterized by "significant levels of loss and bereavement" in childhood and adulthood, exposure to family and spousal violence, stress, and "intense resentment against those they perceive as having wronged them."

The most common murderess is the battered woman who kills after prolonged or habitual abuse at the hands of her husband, boyfriend, or lover. Recent cases have been sensationalized such as that of Bernadette Powell who, after being kidnapped at gunpoint by her ex-husband, took the gun and killed him. Her claim of self-defense was rejected by a jury who convicted her of second-degree murder. Another vivid example of the victim-turned-killer scenario was made into a TV movie, The Burning Bed.

John Kirkpatrick, Ph.D., a stress researcher at the University of New Hampshire, co-authored a study of female criminal homicide. He explains of female perpetrated spouse-lover homicide: "Usually

these crimes occur after long-standing provocation," adding: "In order for women to kill, it had to be perceived by them as a life-threatening situation affecting their physical or emotional well-being." However, Kirkpatrick also notes that many of these women who kill are acting out a self-fulfilling prophecy in resorting to violence, "since they do not seem to seek out any social support, and reject help."

Nor is it comforting to know that homicidal women appear to seek perhaps the most violent means to resolve their dilemma. Observes psychologist Lenore Walker of Colorado Women's College, author of The Battered Woman and a prominent researcher in the study of spouse abuse: "Most of the women I've dealt with have used guns. The man's gun, to be precise. In some cases he throws it at her and dares her to shoot him." As female spouse killers now nearly equal the number of men who kill their wives, it is apparent that more and more women are taking their abusive spouse up on that offer to pull the trigger.

THE FEMALE RAPIST

Recently a rape researcher asked a group of male college students if they were afraid of being raped by a woman. To a man they answered no; then, through snickering and guffawing began uttering sarcastic comments such as, "I hope I can be so lucky," or "I'm afraid of never being raped by a female."

Sound like a male fantasy? Unfortunately this type of "macho" or "wistful" attitude is all too typical among males where it concerns the "prospect" of becoming a rape victim at the hands of

a female. Says sex educator William Masters of the Masters and Johnson Institution: "What man ever thinks he's going to be sexually assaulted? It may be in our daily fantasies, but not in our daily expectations."

The fact is, however, it does happen -- and appears to be on the rise. Between 1977 and 1986, the number of females arrested for forcible rape increased 40 percent. Most females charged with rape are likely accomplices to a male sex assaultist, such as the recent case of an Oakland, California woman who assisted her husband in abducting and detaining women he actually raped. Yet women have also shown both the capacity and motivation to be the aggressor in sexual assaults. Masters and co-worker Philip Sarrel, Ph.D., an associate professor of gynecology at Yale University School of Medicine, dismiss the notion that it would be virtually impossible for a man to achieve or maintain sexual arousal if assaulted by a woman. Because of this myth and its effects on medicine, psychology and the law, they contend that "men who have been sexually assaulted by women have been extremely loath to admit this experience to anyone. They have feared that either they would be disbelieved or that they would be degraded socially and made the object of lewd jokes, not only by their peers but by representatives of the law and health care professions."

"We've seen these guys forcibly assaulted by women," says rape expert Nicholas Groth, director of the sex offender program for the Connecticut State Corrections. "But they get in front

of the police and courts, and who's going to be believe them?"

Women also rape women. In a survey of victims of rape and attempted rape conducted by sociologist Diana Russell of Mills College in Oakland, several of the respondents reported being raped by another female. Although lesbian rape is likely the rarest of all sexual assaults, as sociologist Stuart Miller puts it, the reality of rape today is that "young rape old, blacks rape whites, whites rape women and girls, juveniles rape juveniles, and women rape women and girls." We could add to this: and women also rape men.

## THE FEMALE TERRORIST

Another violent crime rarely associated with women is terrorism or such activities as hijacking of planes, assassinations, bombings, and kidnapping. The truth is in this country women make up the majority of terrorist membership, although the leadership is generally men. The typical female political terrorist is young, white, educated, and comes from a middle or upper class family. Some notable examples that come to mind include Diana Oughton and Patty Hearst.

Studies show that in recent years female terrorists have gone from supportive duties to full fledged terrorism. Some contend that in the process female terrorists have surpassed their male counterparts in viciousness and cruelty. Says one writer: "Women terrorists have consistently proved themselves more ferocious and more intractable in these acts than their

male counterparts. There is a cold rage about some of them that even the most alienated of men seem quite incapable of emulating."

WOMEN IN GANGS

Jessica, a twenty-four-year-old New York Hispanic gang member dressed in all leather, shifts her eyes like a cat as she describes her process of mugging. "First I hide," she says. "Then I jump the person and pull out my switchblade. Sometimes I feel bad because I think they could be my mother. But then I think of my two kids. I have to buy food and clothes for them."

Jessica is typical of the growing number of women involved in either all-female criminal gangs or male gangs. According to criminologist Adler, females have "become more highly integrated in male gang activity and [are] moving closer to parallel but independent, violence-oriented, exclusively criminal gangs." Yet because of the misconception by many that gangs and gang violence is a male preoccupation, law enforcement gives little attention to female gang members even though they "fight, steal, and spy with the same gusto as some of the roughest men on the street." Jessica has been a member of the Sheridans for more than three years and has only a minor conviction to show for it.

Most female gang members tend to be divorced, minority, or impoverished. In addition to a need to belong, they are motivated by the desire for a family and children. Nor are they afraid to take on the violent characteristics of male gang

members. In fact, some male gang members contend that violence erupts faster when women are involved, adding that crowbars and guns tend to be replaced by knives and fingernails. Says one female gang member of her desire to fight: "It keeps me in shape. Some girls use ballet instead."

Jessica brags about her prowess in mugging even men. She says they rarely report it to the police because "men are embarrassed to say they were hit on by a woman."

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

One area of violence in which women clearly seem to have caught up with men, if not surpassed them, is domestic violence. During the ten year stretch between 1977 and 1986, the number of females arrested for offenses against family and children rose nearly 60 percent, whereas there was a 3 percent decline in the males arrested for family offenses. This greater propensity of females to commit acts of familial violence is reflected in the prison statistics. Jeannie Lancaster, warden of the North Carolina Correctional Center For Women in Raleigh, points out that the number of women imprisoned in her state for domestic violence has risen considerably in recent years. "We've seen a dramatic increase in domestic violence, particularly crimes involving children," she says. "Domestic violence is a problem that's been with us for a long time, but it's been exacerbated by unemployment, chemical dependence and other problems. Women primarily commit crimes as an emotional response to their environment, and as

those pressures grow, women are responding."

Although most of the child abuse headlines we read today focus on the male parent, a number of studies point toward the female parent as the primary aggressor of child abuse. In his groundbreaking study of family violence published in The Violent Home, Richard Gelles, M.D., professor of sociology and anthropology at the University of Rhode Island, found that the mother is the "most physically aggressive parent" and that "mothers abuse children as frequently or more frequently than fathers." In Violence Against Children: Physical Child Abuse in the United States, David Gil echoed Gelles' conclusions. His epidemiological study showed that mother or mother substitutes inflicted child abuse in 48 percent of the cases compared to 39 percent of the fathers.

Women are also increasingly abusing their husbands and lovers. Evan, a thirty-three-year-old free lance writer, believed he and his wife, Leigh, thirty-one, were only having a "normal" conversation about the bills when,to his surprise, Leigh "exploded" at him. "Next thing I knew," he says, "she had shoved me up against the wall and was flailing away like a woman gone mad. It came from out of nowhere. I just hope to hell it never comes again."

How prevalent is female perpetrated mate abuse? Sociologists Roger Langley and Richard Levy estimate that 12 million men are physically abused by their wives during some point of their marriage. One study of more than 2,000 couples who were either

married or cohabitating, found that one out of every twenty-two women "kicked, bit, punched, hit with an object, threatened to shoot or stab, or actually did shoot or stab a man during the course of arguments." In half the cases, the women assaulted the men three or more times annually.

Social scientists contend that millions of men are likely the victim of violence by their wives and lovers but abstain from reporting it for fear of humiliation. Furthermore, as in the case of Evan and Leigh, many men do not reciprocate the attack. Suzanne Steinmetz, Ph.D., professor of individual and family studies at the University of Delaware, estimates that 280,000 men each year are battered by their mates but do not defend themselves, often because they fear they might badly injure her, or be labeled a bully.

How do female mate abusers stack up numerically to their male counterparts? Although official reports and victimization surveys suggest that females are far more abused than abusive, other studies posit that the amount of violence between mates is relatively equal. In at least one study, that by Steinmetz who wrote the article, "The Battered Husband Syndrome," the author contends that females are "at least" as violent as their male partners.

Most experts agree that the majority of female violence in relationships is victim precipitated. "About three-quarters of women who strike their husbands do so in self-defense," says Gelles, "after having been struck themselves." However, the

female victim-turned-perpetrator may also be violently predisposed. "Violence can be easily evoked in persons prone to aggression," says Long Island psychoanalyst Harold Blum. "Primitive patterns of attack and counterattack come to the fore."

Sociologists also find that once a pattern of violence is established it becomes easier to resort to it and harder to refrain. The woman, just as the man, who finds violence to be the means to an end in a domestic dispute is likely to come to depend on it more and more.

PROSTITUTION

Prostitution is another "hidden" area where the violence capacity of women is overshadowed by that of men. Often considered a "victimless" crime, prostitution is increasingly becoming more violent for the prostitute and the customer alike. Along with a 45 percent jump in prostitution related arrests for females since 1977, studies show that more prostitutes are relying on drugs in the profession. This dependency in turn is forcing many prostitutes into violence and assaults against their johns or people on the streets in order to support their habit. As Sheila, a pretty, early twenties Sacramento prostitute and drug addict tells it: "If there's no other way to get a fix, I'm going to do whatever I have to to get some money -- even if it means hurting somebody."

In addition to perpetrating violent aggression, prostitutes now have a new weapon to potentially inflict upon others: AIDS.

Figures show that many female prostitutes nationwide are carrying the AIDS virus, according to a recent government report. The Center for Disease Control report found that the rate of AIDS among prostitutes is well above that of the general population. Another study at the University of Miami found that 41 percent of the 90 street prostitutes tested were infected.

One might argue that AIDS, per se, does not constitute violent behavior. True. However, it does when used as a weapon or with reckless abandon -- particularly considering the "death sentence" that is presently given when infected. Several incidents have been reported in the last year in which prostitutes with AIDS willfully and maliciously continued to have sex with unsuspecting customers. In at least one case, the district attorney's office charged the prostitute with attempted murder.

One prostitute who has AIDS, and is currently in a drug rehabilitation center, speaks candidly about her feelings of passing the disease on: "Why should I care? If the man is willing to have sex with me and is not willing to wear a condom, it's his business if he gets it." When this attitude is combined with substance abuse and the harsh reality of prostitution, the prospects become frightening.

YOUNG FEMALES ARE BECOMING MORE VIOLENT TOO

Not only have we seen an increase in the range and incidence of violence among adult females, but their little sisters have also shown an increased tendency to commit violent and callous crimes. Take the case of Shirley, fourteen, and Cindy, fifteen.

Both were recently found guilty of first-degree murder in the death of an eighty-five-year-old Northern California woman. She had been stabbed 28 times. The girls described the killing as "lots of fun."

When asked how she feels about the killing, Cindy responds gleefully: "To honestly tell you the truth -- this goes for me and Shirley both -- we didn't feel any badness. We felt good inside. We wanted to go out and celebrate. We enjoyed it." Asked why, she considers it, then answers: "I don't know. It was like. . .and then after we did it we wanted to do another one. We just wanted to kill someone. Just for fun, because it seemed enjoying."

Violent crime among female juvenile offenders rose some 2 percent from 1977 to 1986, compared to a 2 percent decline for male juveniles. Although arrests of female juveniles for murder dropped during this period, arrests for aggravated assault showed a 15 percent climb for females under age 18. Overall, juvenile justice officials believe that there is a dangerous trend being set by juveniles -- female and male -- toward more brutality and aggression than ever before; citing reasons ranging from poverty to boredom to simply a penchant for destructive and self-destructive behavior.

SEEKING TO UNDERSTAND TODAY'S VIOLENT WOMAN

Why are women apparently committing more acts of violence today? Here are four reasons the experts have offered us.

The Premenstrual Syndrome Perspective

A prominent approach in recent years in the study of violent crime committed by women has been the role premenstrual syndrome or PMS plays in female behavioral patterns. A few years ago in Great Britain, Sandie Smith, a twenty-nine-year-old bar maid, received three years probation for threatening to kill a police officer with a knife. Prior to that she had been convicted of nearly thirty other crimes, including murder and assault. That same year, thirty-seven year old Christine English, also of England, killed her lover with her car, to which she was given one year's probation after pleading guilty to "manslaughter by reason of diminished capacity."

In both instances, the defendant received a lesser sentence due to successfully establishing that premenstrual syndrome was responsible for her actions. Smith's attorney pointed out that all of her offenses coincided with her premenstrual phases, which turned her into a "raging bull." Similarly, English's lawyer argued that when she ran down her lover, she was experiencing "an extremely aggravated form of premenstrual physical condition."

PMS is characterized by symptoms ranging from fatigue, tension, irritability, nervousness, cramps, headaches, and depression. Although a number of studies have shown a correlation between female violent criminality and various phases of the menstrual cycle, in this country it has yet to be accepted as an adequate causal explanation for women's crimes of violence. By most accounts, the majority of women experiencing PMS are not

prone to violent or even nonviolent behavior as a result of it. One sociologist suggested the link bewteen the arrests of women for violent behavior and PMS may simply be a matter of fatigue and slower reaction time in the course of their crime.

## Changing Sex Roles and Liberation

Many believe that the force behind the violence displayed by women today is the women's liberation movement, which criminologist Adler describes as a "new feminism" affecting all women. It is within this "consciousness-raising" movement that Adler predicts that as women move closer to men socially, so too will they become their equals in crime.

Women today are seeing more and more opportunities come their way -- both legitimate and illegitimate. As a result, they are experiencing a shift in sex roles: from the traditional concept of the woman's role to one that challenges men dominated roles. Because of this expansion in opportunity, the pressures that go along with it, and the resistance offered by men, women have now been put in a position where violence becomes a viable, optional, and sometimes necessary response.

## Economic Pressures

Some experts contend that today's violent woman is a reflection of their increased economic pressures, forcing them into aggressive behavior as a means of survival and to support their families. Notes one sociologist, despite the overall increase of women in the labor force, "their participation in positions of

authority, prestige, and higher monetary reward has not kept pace with that increase."

Substance abuse

The role of substance abuse in the commission of violent crimes has been well documented. Studies show that women addicted to drugs and alcohol is rising rapidly, in keeping pace with the legitimate opportunities now afforded them. The use of such drugs as crack cocaine and its highly addictive, mind altering ingredients is believed to be responsible for an increasing proportion of the aggressive and violent behavior attributed to women, often as a recourse to support their habit.

We may never know for certain what combinations of causes explain the violence of women any more than we do that of men. However, in once again posing the question: Are violent women catching up to violent men? -- the logical answer is no. Now, if we rephrase the question and ask are violent women becoming more heterogeneous and have they actually proven to be as violent in some forms of behavior as men? -- then the answer is clearly yes.

COMING TO TERMS WITH OUR VIOLENCE

What can be done about curbing violent behavior? Here are some suggestions:

- <u>Realize</u> that we are not alone in our problems/situations/circumstances and that help is available through a number of sources to help us control violence and aggression.

°Refrain from using violence as a "quick" means to an end. It ultimately will catch up with you.

°Report to the authorities or social services the violent behavior of others who are a legitimate threat to you or someone you know.

°Recognize that substance use/abuse has a strange effect on the mind and the capacity to reason, and therefore could lead to unplanned violence.

°Remember that violence can quickly lap over to criminal behavior and result in more long term problems than you could imagine.

°Retreat from the notion that violence is a male phenomenon and a male problem. It is something that can manifest itself in any of us and we all must learn to deal with it.